

Cloud

by Erika Stensvaag

"In a couple of weeks, they'll be eating rats." With a nod of satisfaction, Admiral Horatio Hicks turned away from his viewscreen. As his piercing stare swept over me, I tried not to roll my eyes. Hicks stood ramrod-straight, with his hands clasped behind his back. I think he was born that way.

"Indeed, sir," replied his aide Colonel Keller, a beady-eyed weasel. "Those dirty Reds will learn that the *Atlantis* is not to be toyed with."

I didn't even want to serve on this ship — the flagship of the arrogant creep who just looked right through me. I knew my bitterness made my work less than what it should have been, but I just couldn't change the facts. After I finished my initial combat training, I was sure I'd become a weapons tech in James Howler's Blade wing. The Camriks and Howlers had served together for generations. My father started as one of Howler's father's grunts and worked his way up to be second in command under good old Jimmy himself.

That was before Hicks appointed himself man of the hour. We needed to reclaim Phobos, he decided, and the crew of the *Atlantis* was revamped for the job. So my classmate Jannett Yens and I ended up sitting on our bums there aboard this glorified yacht rather than actually *doing* something. Our assignments are just one reason I think my parent company, the Coordination and Intelligence Syndicate, shouldn't contract out to the Interstellar Commerce Corporation. I mean, it was obvious those iCom guys didn't know how to divvy up posts.

Jannett climbed faster than I did. She had reached Level I Battle Coordinator — a guru. She was icy cool under fire and always levelheaded. Even her hair behaved better than mine. She told me all the time that I should stop speaking my mind so much, and maybe even stop flashing Hicks' brown-nosed assistant such caustic looks. I just couldn't seem to keep my loathing of that stupid little man inside.

"That guy is such a worm. Why should I care what he thinks?"

"Hicks can't remember anyone's ID number, let alone their names, Sana. His aide is the one who reminds him. So be nice!"

We had the same conversation almost daily for weeks. Usually it was whispered as Hicks gave his morning updates and his peon importantly sat next to him.

I shot Jannett a look across the aisle as Hicks passed. Four of us were crowded in a position originally built for one person. CISyn's Technician Tracker Holopanel surrounded us but I could see Jannett through the TTH as she plotted coordinates and formulated strategies on the state of the art versions of the dinosaurs we used. She gestured for me to get back to work.

Eating rats, huh? They're not going to give up that easily. Sometimes the command personnel are too close to see the big picture. My job as a General Assault Technician was to show it to them. Admirals and captains only paid attention to the gurus, though, and Jannett was the only guru who even acknowledged when one of us techies talks. That's because she *was* one of us not so long ago.

I turned my mind back to the task and tried not to dwell on the events of the last few weeks. The more I tried, the more the familiar, ominous feeling overwhelmed me. *You're not in the middle of it anymore. Hicks knows what he's doing. He's been in enough battles to know when things are over. Just keep breathing.* I stared at the familiar shapes on my tracker's screen until they became blurry.

"Techies, pay attention to your battle placements!" barked the exec officer on the deck. "Listen up! Admiral Hicks is ready to give the attack order. I want everyone to watch the trackers carefully. These rebels have no strategy and that makes our job harder."

The blockade started, and even ended, simply enough: Hicks sent a flight of Type IIs to find out how the rebels worked. These guys weren't anything special; maybe two of them had thrown hard light at something besides a target drone. The report they brought back was nothing short of boring. It didn't give us any information I couldn't have found out by watching the *Lives of the Martian Rebels* documentary I found late one night when I couldn't sleep. The report told us that most of their supplies came from their home planet, with a couple dozen replacement troops arriving with each shipment. At first, the Reds had round-the-clock surveillance ships patrolling the glorified rock, ready for anything that may happen.

But not the night we attacked. We watched them carefully, all right — but there was nothing to see. The entire blockade of Phobos seemed altogether too easy. The old standby middle of the night attack made things seem simple. The rebel fighters were all hangared, the pilots asleep, their katana sheathed. It was eerily quiet.

"Is it always this easy?" I asked one of the gurus.

"Nope," he replied and turned away quickly.

Maybe Shochō spoke to them or maybe they did it the old-fashioned way and intercepted our transmissions, but somehow they were aware of us — and chose not to do anything about it. The Martian troops stationed on Phobos knew we were coming, and they went to bed instead of defending themselves.

Hicks said they got too comfortable. The version of his after-action report that was unclassified told us they were sure we weren't coming back. The rebel guys in charge, whatever they call them, decided we'd given up on taking back the rock.

Martian authorities decided the watchmen who previously patrolled the base of Phobos were no longer necessary, Hicks wrote. It was because of this we decided to continue the operation. Updated plans call for the blockade to be maintained at its current level indefinitely.

My research on the "Gongen," as they like to call themselves, indicated that they would rather die than to fall as easily as they did — their pride is legendary. I was sure there would be more to come.

As the buzz around me died, it became easier to concentrate on my work. Hicks came around there a lot — mostly because it was on the path between his office and the command deck — but people around there never seemed to get used to it. I figure it's his ship; he was going to be around. I can't believe these people still got starstruck over their admiral. Seriously, get over it.

I watched my screen. Yellow blip followed by green blip — probably just debris clouding my view. Jannett's tracker could tell the difference between a big fat asteroid and an enemy ship. Mine, not so much. I dragged my finger across the screen and watched the image slowly distort to a new view.

Technician 45 changes view at 1143, I keyed into my log. Scan will now commence at starboard aft quarter and proceed unilaterally forward.

Hicks wanted us to document our every action while on the sensor deck. Jannett thought that was a great idea, but she was just that kind of organizational freak. I preferred a "fly by the seat of your pants" kind of approach.

"You can't put things off 'til the last minute and still expect to finish them perfectly, you know. Half of our class hated you because of that incident with your senior finals."

Jannett was right. Sometimes my impulses got me into serious trouble. I almost didn't graduate from the academy because I put off even starting to study for my finals until two days before graduation. I ended up finishing Armaments, my last practical, about ten minutes before the ceremony started.

That kind of luck didn't follow me onto the *Atlantis*, though. My first, and only, performance review encouraged me to "use my planning time wisely" in order to "access my resources more fully." I just hadn't had a chance to show them what I can do.

"Would the following please report to the command deck immediately for further briefing," a voice blared over the loudspeaker. "Abers, Alya; Camrik, Sana; Muphie, Ryno and Rusing, Frane."

My entire group turned to stare at me as I stood to leave. I gave them a small wave and said, "Wish me luck, I guess."

I made my way to the main deck where three unfamiliar faces greeted me. The patches on their arms told me that two were iCom pilots, and the last was a Strategic Coordinator tech — a kind of a junior guru. A short man dressed in a high-level guru uniform hurried up to us.

"Is everyone here? Good," he said, not waiting for an answer. "You've all been selected for a special mission. Follow me."

He led us down the corridors to a private conference room. We took seats around the large dark table just in time to see Hicks himself appear on the holo screen.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I regret that I am unable to be with you this evening to brief you regarding your mission. However, I know that Colonel Keller, my aide, will set you on your course as well as I could. Please turn your attention to him now as he explains the exact nature of this duty. Thank you for your service."

Keller passed around documents marked *Classified: Eyes Only*. I opened my folder to the first page just as I heard him say, "Please do not open these until I instruct you to do so." He looked right at me as I put it down and glanced around the room. The others sat with their hands in their laps, folders untouched.

"Um, sorry," I muttered, looking at Keller.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot overemphasize the importance of following orders from this point on. You have all been selected on the advice of some of Admiral Hicks' most trusted assistants. Please do not let your mentors down." Keller looked at each of us pointedly and then continued. "The duty for which you have been chosen is one of great danger, but also of great prestige. Your families will have great honor when you return in victory," he paused. "Please turn to the first page of your documents."

Mission Phobos Recovery, the page read, along with a cursory outline of what I hoped was a more detailed plan.

"Now that the blockade of Phobos is complete, Admiral Hicks is confident that Earther forces can and will reclaim what is rightfully ours. Your strategy group will serve an important role in that campaign."

Keller's voice was mechanical, like he had over-practiced his speech. I knew he was regurgitating what Hicks had told him.

"Please note that within your packet each of you has an individual plan. I would advise you to study it carefully. Tonight, you are to pack your personal belongings and give them to your unit leader. You will not need them. Please bring only corp-issued uniforms and equipment. I will see you back here at 0600 hours."

Keller stood, as if he was about to leave. I looked around the room again, this time in amazement.

"You mean, that's — that's it?" I said, maybe louder than I intended. "You tell us we're going to be in one of the most dangerous missions since the war began and leave without so much as an explanation?"

"All that you need to know, Ms. Camrik, is in your orders," he blustered.

I knew he didn't use my professional title on purpose, just to irritate me. Knowing that didn't make it irritate me less, though. "Certainly, Mr. Keller. Shall I address any questions I may have to you, or directly to Mr. Hicks?"

If looks could kill, I certainly would be dead now and not facing this "great danger." I cleared my throat, picked up my folder, and walked out of the room, back straight.

The walk back to my quarters never seemed so long before. I stopped at my station first to pick up what equipment they issued me. I could tell by the sheepish way my fellow group members continued working that they knew something was coming.

I caught Jannett's eye and motioned for her to follow me. We walked down the corridor silently. Once we were inside, however, I told her the whole story.

"Are you serious?" she sat cross-legged on my bed, the "classified" document opened on her lap. She brushed back her long brown hair with her hand and asked, "This is all they gave you?"

"Yup." I began dividing up my stuff into two piles: Mine and Theirs. "What really gets me is that they claim they know how dangerous this is going to be, but won't give us more direction. Keller said it was because we were all so highly recommended, but I just can't seem to believe that. I mean, let's face it — my reputation here is less than..."

"Um... they think you do crap work, Sana."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, I guess."

"No, seriously. I tell you this because you're my friend and because you're probably going to get shot in the head in the next couple weeks and not remember this."

I gave her my best withering look. "Yes?"

"At the guru meeting they always read a list of the people who've screwed up that week. I swear your name has been on that list since you got here. I know you; I know that you're better than that. You just haven't proven yourself yet. They don't know what you're capable of."

"Yeah, this mission sucks. It sucks real bad. But you can approach it one of two ways. You can decide that your fate is inevitable and go in and fulfill it. Or else you can realize that you're better than that. Your family history says you're better than that. *Your* history says you're better than that. So suck it up and do it."

I met my mission companions in the conference room the next morning and the first thing I noticed is how much more stuff they have than me. All of my corporation-issued materials fit into one small satchel. They each had one large and one small bag, both filled to bursting.

Great, I think. Not only are these guys more experienced than I am but they also have more equipment.

Keller came in not three seconds later and told us to follow him. He led us out to the docking bay where we stopped next to two old model Type IV fighters.

"Ladies and gentlemen, these ships will be your homes for the next couple days. Two of you in each one; Camrik and Rusing in this one," he tapped the side of the ship with his pen, "and Abers and Muphie in the other. Admiral Hicks wishes me to thank you for your loyal service. All of Earth is counting on you."

Rusing and I looked at each other. I swore there was disdain in his eyes. He was a hawk-faced recruit with short, wiry blonde hair.

"So you're a pilot, right?" I asked him.

"Of course," he replied smugly. "That's what it takes for a Type IV. Front seat pilot, back seat weapons operator. You have done this before, yes?"

"I passed the simulator test," I said. "Barely. I have a feeling that you wouldn't be on this excursion yourself if you were top of the class material. Am I right?"

"As it happens, I was the best rated pilot in my class," he smirked, "but I had a personal problem with the instructor. I haven't had what you'd call an exemplary career." He smiled sheepishly.

"I haven't quite reached my real potential either," I replied. "Seems like this is the misfit detail."

"Then we both have nothing to lose, do we?" he asked. Then he saluted me. "Man your position, Technician Camrik."

"Aye, captain." I tucked my ponytail into my helmet and climbed into the cockpit. We were off to a fabulous start.

A few hours later, we cut through the atmosphere and I hoped that nothing fell off our ship. They looked just like the *Inca* squadron ships we learned about in school, but with none of the recent upgrades. The outdated equipment made me feel like I was back on the *Atlantis* at my station.

According to the “plan,” and I use that term loosely, our two ships were to patrol outside the perimeter of the *Atlantis* scanners. We approached Phobos to land on the unpopulated side and lead what would be, essentially, an invasion. Our individual plans called for Rusing and I each to be aware of the enemy’s placement and organization.

I settled into the back seat, but I was still wondering what Rusing had done to get into such trouble. I tried to bond with him. “How about the way they sent us out here, huh?” I asked over the intercom.

“I’m sure the Admiral has his reasons for sending us out like this. He is a knowledgeable leader.” A smug reply from my pilot. I stopped trying to make conversation after that.

For the first day or so, we alternated sleeping and manning the ship. When I was awake, I tried to scan as much of the area as possible. I constantly changed the image on the tracker panel and even watched out all sides of the bubble canopy. I could see the ship that carried Muphie and Abers to port. It was boring and sometimes I had a hard time staying awake.

At one point, I tried to find a way to intercept the other ship’s comm transmission. My single espionage class didn’t cover interception techniques so my attempts weren’t successful. Rusing took note of my shaky attempt.

“What are you doing?” he asked, accusingly.

“Rigging our comm unit to intercept their transmissions.”

“Technician Camrik, I’m going to have to ask you to cease and desist. Our mission plans do not call for such misuse of corporation property.”

I closed the comm down and quipped, “Our mission plans don’t call for much of anything, do they?”

We rode in silence for the next few hours. Then the comm beeped.

“Rusing here,” said the front seater. No response. It beeped again. “Hello, Rusing here.” Still no response. The beeping turned into garbled transmissions.

“Hello, Rusing here, your transmission is unclear. I said *your transmission is unclear*.”

“No, wait! It’s not unclear — they’re speaking *Gongen*!” I switched my primary screen from weapons mode to comm mode. “Quick — start recording!” I keyed the comm to save the transmission. Words began to form across my display. *Attack — Earther — Mission — Cloud — Death — Ours — Defend*.

“We’ve got kites, four o’clock low,” barked Rusing. “Hold on, I’m gonna lose ‘em.” The ship lurched as he pulled a wingover to port. He was a good pilot, and it was a slick maneuver. I switched back to weapons mode.

I turned my head just in time to see a red fog approaching our companion ship. I blinked and realized it wasn’t fog — it was the rebel fighters. They seemed to be everywhere. An orange blast cut off the tail of the ship with Muphie and Albers.

"It's like they don't even have a formation!" Rusing cried. He leaned on the throttle, trying to gain separation, and it felt like we pulled about 5 G.

"No formation, but there is a pattern," I said, analyzing the incoming fighters on my tracking screen. A stream of data collected on my secondary display.

Keller's voice came over the command channel. "All units engage and fight! We must defeat the enemy quickly!"

"Roger that, command." Seuril was looping back to engage the cloud of rebel fighters.

Two Gongen bursts sliced through our sister ship. There were no ejections. The fighter exploded in a silent fireball and I was sure we would be next.

"Rusing, we gotta get out of here. We don't stand a chance!" My voice was more frantic than I would have liked.

"I'll get us out, you just keep collecting data. I hope you're strapped in!" He lurched the ship forward with a heavy push on the throttle.

There was something about the way those ships all fired at the same time, the way they flew so close together that they were unrecognizable. It just didn't feel right to me. I switched to comm mode.

"Camrik, bring the tracker back up!" he yelled from the cockpit. When I switched off the long range scanners, he pulled back on the stick and we broke off.

"I have to get this data back to *Atlantis*, right now." I ignored him and punched in a special comm code. *Come on you stupid thing, hurry up!*

"This had better be important," barked Rusing. "I'll lose them and then come back for another pass."

"Yens here." I watched as Jannett's familiar face appeared on my screen.

"Jannett! Oh, thank you for answering!" I paused for a moment to catch my breath. "You've got to help me. I think I understand what's going on!"

"Yeah, I do too, Sana! The rebels are attacking us in some kind of chaotic bombardment. I really can't talk now."

"Please just take a look at this tracking data. I think they have a plan!" I punched a key to start the download stream. Rusing had managed to get separation between us and the cloud of Gongen fighters, but he was banking around to make another approach.

"Of course they have a plan. It's to shoot the crap out of us till we leave. Hicks isn't going, though. He knows our supplies are going to outlast them."

"No, a real plan, Jannett. These people are far more intelligent than Hicks gives them credit for. We need to retreat and pronto." I took a deep breath. "I need you to put me through to Hicks."

"Are you crazy? Look, I can't do that unless you are one hundred percent sure you're right. We're talking serious trouble here, maybe our careers."

"I'm sure." That's all I said.

She paused for a second, looking away. "I see your tracking data now. Alright..."

"Camrik, terminate this transmission now. This is an unauthorized use of this channel." The face of Hicks' weasel Keller appeared on my second display. He did not look happy to see me.

"Keller, put me through to Hicks right away," I said anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Technician Camrik, *Admiral* Hicks is unavailable. Perhaps you are unaware, but we are currently under attack."

"Look, I know this mission was your idea. You and I have never liked each other," I told him.

"Indeed, that is the case," he lowered his voice to a whisper. "How do you think you ended up on that mission? It was I who recommended you. No one else knew what they were recommending for. I did. I wanted you on that ship."

"I don't care. Just get me Hicks."

"I most certainly will not." Keller's face was stern.

"Hang on, Sana." Jannett said on the other channel. "I can get you through to Hicks. I shouldn't, but I can."

"You'll both be court-martialed for this! I'll see to it!" Red-faced and screaming, Keller disconnected.

Jannett's face was replaced with Hicks. *Yes! I knew she could put me through.* I was tongue-tied. I hadn't thought about what I was going to say. Rusing banked our ship hard, and my helmet bumped the canopy. "Good evening, sir. I, uh, my name is Sana Camrik and I'm a General Assault Technician. Sir, I think I know what's going on."

"I imagine I know what's going on pretty well myself, thanks." I saw Hicks reach for the disconnect button.

"Please, sir. She knows what she's talking about." I heard Jannett's voice. She was with Hicks now.

Hicks hesitated a moment before responding. "Go ahead — but be concise."

"There is a pattern to their attacks, one that goes beyond all out battle. I tracked it, Admiral, I saw the way the red ships flew first as one and then divided at just the right moment. I'm downloading the data now. They're coordinating the fire between the fighters using onboard AI. It's not an undisciplined attack. We're outgunned and outflanked." I paused. "Sir, you and I both know these people are as intelligent as we are — if not more. They're not going to give up that easily."

The impassionate gaze of Hicks burned through the screen at me. "Camrik, you said your name is?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew your father." Hicks nodded slightly, and turned away. I heard him speak to the others on the command deck. "*Retreat! Turn and retreat!*" I took a deep breath and sat back in the seat.

I never saw Hicks after that. I was transferred to Howler's Blades once we got back home. Jannett and I did, however, receive a message from Hicks almost immediately.

"Sana Camrik showed great valor during the blockade of Phobos," he says in his statement. "She and her fellow CISyn coordinator Jannett Yens together saved thousands of lives by bravely acting on their own initiative. Thus, I proudly bestow the title of Assault Guru upon Camrik, and Level II Battle Coordinator Guru upon Yens.

He could have at least told us in person. Arrogant creep.

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